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LITERACY & IDENTITY

Why Johnny can never, ever read: The perpetual literacy crisis and student identity

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Fashion trends and politicians come and go, but one thing that never seems to go out of style is a good old-fashioned literacy crisis. Don't believe me? Then tell me the year of each of the following quotations:

1. Those of use who have been doomed to read manuscripts written in an examination room—whether at a grammar school, a high school, or a college—have found the work of even good scholars disfigured by bad spelling, confusing punctuation, ungrammatical, obscure, ambiguous, or inelegant expressions.
2. If your children are attending college, chances are when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any degree of structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there.
3. The young people enrolled in middle and high school who lack the broad literacy skills to comprehend and learn advanced academic subjects will suffer serious social, emotional, and economic consequences. As a country, the repercussions of a national literacy crisis will seriously hinder this nation's ability to sustain its social, political, and economic well-being in this century.

The answers are 1.—1879 (Hill, 1995, p. 45), 2.—1975 (Sheils, 1975, p. 58), and 3.—2006 (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2005, p. 4). In fact, it's not difficult to look back over the past 150 years and find a constant and consistent level of concern about the abilities of young people to read and write. This “wailing” does not just happen in the United States—it has made headlines from Australia to Britain. Every generation, upon reaching middle age, finds itself compelled to look at the literacy practices of young people and lament at how poor the work produced today is compared to that of idyllic days gone by. (It does make you wonder, however, that if the ability to read and write has been in such sustained decline for generations, shouldn't we by this point be staring at print in baffled incomprehension?)

The causes

The causes of the literacy crisis for any generation may vary. On the one hand, there are recurring criticisms of teachers and whatever pedagogies they are using. On the other, there is a common

concern about the popular culture of the day from sensationalist newspapers in the 1880s to movies in the 1930s, television in the 1970s, and video games and text messaging today. Each invocation of a literacy crisis, however, makes no mention of previous crises or asks about what happened to students in the crisis-ridden classes of yore as they became adults. In 1983, for example, the U.S. government report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) warned that schools, including literacy education, were in a crisis that would undermine the national economy and society in years to come. Yet, as Newkirk (2000) pointed out, nearly 20 years later those students had become adults praised for technological and economic innovation. Of course, now that the students of the “Nation at Risk” generation are adults, they can complain about the literacy crisis among the young.

It is difficult to get a sense of how genuine any of these concerns may be. Complaints about student reading and writing abilities often can be traced to anecdotal evidence and the selective memories of adults. Popular media commentators, who know that there are always ratings to be had in attacking public education, often fan the flames made by such complaints. Others may point to standardized test scores as evidence of decline while ignoring the fact that the tests are poorly constructed instruments for literacy assessment and that they only assess a limited range of reading and writing activities. Meanwhile, more comprehensive and complex ways of assessing literacy, which cover a range of students’ literacy practices including those outside the classroom, are usually too expensive to implement and are criticized for their very complexity and nuance by self-appointed defenders of “standards.”

To say that literacy is a social practice that is vastly more difficult to define and measure in the same kinds of consistent terms that we would measure something like average rainfall is not an argument against rigorous literacy education or a denial of the utility of designing sophisticated and nuanced assessment processes. But the argu-

ments about how to define and assess literacy are as old and persistent as laments about literacy crises and, while worthy of continued discussion, are not where my thoughts are today.

I’m not arguing that there are no challenges in literacy education or that we don’t face important challenges in helping struggling students develop their reading and writing abilities. I am wondering why the “drums beat” about such crises so ceaselessly from one generation to the next when clearly most people by adulthood have acquired adequate levels of literacy. What do such constant concerns tell us about our perceptions of young people as readers and writers? And how do these perceptions of students’ identities influence our literacy policies and pedagogies?

The reasons

Like so many persistent anxieties, the concerns about literacy are often only surface symptoms of deeper anxieties we are less willing to discuss. Although the conversations are about reading and writing and the arguments about whether young people are acquiring the literacy skills to be “competitive in the world market”—whatever that means—the underlying anxieties are not about instrumental literacies necessary to perform in a job. In fact, the level of instrumental literacy necessary to engage in most jobs has changed little over the past half-century (Newkirk, 2000). Despite a century of a perpetual literacy crisis, the economy has grown, adapted, and flourished.

If the problem is not instrumental levels of reading and writing, what is it that drives society’s anxiety about reading and writing? I would argue that many of the complaints about a literacy crisis in fact reflect middle class anxieties about status and privilege. After all, the “wailing” about deficient reading and writing abilities comes not from the affluent. They rest easy in the knowledge that the elite, private schools they send their children to will provide them with the appropriate literacy experiences. Neither are the poor the ones

we hear complaining about literacy education, if only because the poor have no voice or political clout. Instead, the alarm about declining literacy skills most often comes from the middle class.

Yet walk into most middle class public schools and talk to the students, and it is hard to believe that they do not know how to read and write. In fact, even brief conversations often reveal that they are reading and writing a great deal outside of the classroom. And, still, the rhetoric of the perpetual literacy crisis would ask us to look at these students and see inept, struggling readers and writers and ignore other forms of literacy they have mastered. If we identify these young people as “in crisis,” rather than confident and adventurous readers and writers, how does that influence how we approach our teaching and our means of assessment?

Literacy as cultural capital

The issue, then, is not what Scribner (1984) described as “literacy as adaptation” or the functional literacy “conceived broadly as the level of proficiency necessary for effective performance in a range of settings and customary activities” (p. 8). The anxiety comes from whether young people are acquiring what Scribner described as “literacy as power” and “literacy as a state of grace” (p. 7). Scribner argued that such conceptions of literacy connect the ability to engage in certain literacy practices with certain professional class virtues and social power. It is the potential loss of these literacy practices that serve as markers of cultural capital and professional status that worries the middle class.

This helps explain why concerns about declines in reading and writing are often only about particular kinds of literacy practices—those that are invested with the kinds of cultural capital that are recognized as belonging to middle and upper classes. Students might read and write a great deal online and communicate well with people around the world through instant messaging, but these activities are not considered legitimate liter-

acy practices. Such students, Scribner (2004) argued, are not mastering the literacy practices that make a person literate in a way that reveals refined virtues. For example, the National Endowment for the Arts (2004) report, *Reading at Risk*, which charted the decline of literary reading, received a great deal of media attention as another indication of a literacy crisis. The definitions of *literacy* and *literary reading* in the report were laughably narrow, and many of the people calling attention to the report probably rarely read such literature themselves. And yet the report gained public attention because it seemed to be another indicator that young people were not acquiring the necessary cultural capital to maintain their middle class status. Literacy was implicitly defined as the reading of great books that make one a great person rather than as rhetorically effective communication.

In an economy that is increasingly focused on communication and information, cultural capital is a growing factor in determining status for the middle class. While the affluent worry little about losing their class standing because they have abundant economic capital, the middle class understands that the key to a professional or white-collar job and the attendant economic security it entails rests largely on how one displays cultural capital. Middle class life for many rests not on accumulated wealth but on the ability to convincingly adopt and perform a set of bourgeois conventions of behavior. For example, understanding that an office worker should wear a suit rather than shorts and a T-shirt is one such convention. Language use is another obvious class marker. Unconventional speech or language is regarded in the larger culture as an indication of lower class status, and any person who uses it is penalized in terms of economic opportunities. A person could fall from the middle class if he or she loses the ability to use language in a conventional way. Middle class identity is not primarily about economic status. Middle class identity, first and foremost, is the ability to display certain kinds of cultural capital in certain contexts.

It's no surprise that anxieties over unconventional language use are often at the forefront of literacy crisis rhetoric. Complaints about supposed declines in standardized grammar use are often coupled with calls for a return to the "basics," which usually means "drill-and-kill" grammar instruction and worksheets. New forms of writing, such as e-mail or text messaging, along with overly lenient teachers, are often blamed for the crises in correct grammar. These complaints are rarely based on research but are more often anecdotal in nature. In fact, research into instant messaging, for example, indicates that students are able to switch back and forth between conventional and less conventional grammar and spelling depending on the context of the discussion (Takayoshi, 2006).

You may have noticed that I've been using the word *conventional* rather than *correct* to describe language use. I do this because language use is a matter of convention and context. Although some people like to pretend that there are constant, "a-contextual" rules for grammar, in fact we know that the effect of using language in unconventional ways depends on who is using it and in what context (Harris, 1997; Hartwell, 1985; Williams, 1981). I am a tenured professor so I can get away with splitting an infinitive or other "errors" because my position causes people to think that my unconventional writing is intentional. Even sentence fragments.

Yet there are some conventions, such as subject-verb agreement, that I cannot break. The editors of this journal would "correct" these mistakes because they might seem jarring to readers. (The fact that there are editors to review my work is another example of how my position of power benefits me when it comes to language use.) When we teach students that there are sets of unbreakable rules of grammar we deny to them what we know—that some conventions are more important in terms of marking cultural capital and social class than others. Problems with subject-verb agreement or shifting tenses within a sentence can have consequences in the perform-

ance of cultural power. And yet it is clear—given what I read and hear every day—that few care anymore that, according to my dictionary, *loan* is a noun and *lend* is a verb.

As teachers, then, we should help students understand that grammar is not a rigid set of rules but a set of conventions that connect identities and status to language use. Of course, we should teach them that unconventional sentences could obscure meaning. Yet when we talk about grammar and language use we should teach them as matters of style and convention. We should make students aware that different cultural settings call for different conventions of language use. We should also make them aware that using language in unconventional ways in the wrong context results in more than a red mark from a teacher's pen—it marks the identity of the author in a particular way for the audience. As a consequence, we should also teach students which conventions are the most important in terms of cultural capital when displaying a professional or academic identity. And we should teach students these conventions as elements of effective writing and rhetoric rather than on grammar worksheets (the latter might teach students how to fill out worksheets but will have little effect on student writing).

The solution

If we allow ourselves to get caught up in the hysterical rhetoric of the most recent literacy crisis it distracts us from teaching what we know to be important in reading and writing. If we want to serve students best in their literacy education we should not scare them with tales of the literacy crisis of their generation but instead teach them how to understand how language, culture, and identity work together. Then students can read and write in any context, making their language choices with knowledge and power.

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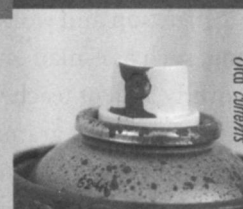
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